

Visions of 1960s America from an American and (East) European Intellectual Perspective

Stanislav Kolář

Abstract

*This essay is based on the comparison of two books of non-fiction published in the 1960s – John Steinbeck’s essayistic book *America and Americans* and *An Angel on Wheels (Anděl na kolečkách)* by the Czech writer Miroslav Holub. Both books presented a fresh, untraditional view of America during that decade. While Steinbeck voiced his vision of American culture and society from an American perspective, the Czech poet and scientist Holub saw America from a certain distance, as an artist coming from Central Europe, a region divided by the Cold War. The essay attempts to find analogies but also differences between both writers’ views of American society.*

Keywords: USA, the 1960s, American literature, Czech literature, childhood, youth, American landscape, American culture

Introduction

The 1960s are seen as a turbulent decade of new hopes and changes both in America and Europe. The civil rights movement, the rise of feminism, the emergence of the hippies in the United States, countercultural resistance against the establishment culminating in the memorable Woodstock music festival in 1969, social turmoil in Mexico, student demonstrations in France and other parts of this world, the Prague Spring of 1968 in Czechoslovakia and many other subversive trends in this period signaled that “the times they are a-changin’” – to quote the famous song by Bob Dylan, one of the iconic figures of the liberal sixties. In this radical decade two interesting books of essays expressing views of America were published – Miroslav Holub’s *An Angel on Wheels (Anděl na kolečkách)* in 1963 and John Steinbeck’s *America and Americans* in 1966.

While Steinbeck, being an insider, voiced his vision of American culture and society from an American perspective, the Czech poet and scientist Holub, one of very few Czech poets who has become known in the United States and whose poetry has been translated into more than 30 languages, saw America not only through European eyes but, more importantly, as a writer coming from “the other Europe”, to use Philip Roth’s term: the

East European region behind the iron curtain amidst the Cold War. It was not only the geopolitical space that divided both writers; their writings were shaped by a different generational experience (Steinbeck was born in 1902, Holub in 1923). For these reasons their views of America differed to an extent, particularly in their emphasis on certain aspects of American social life. Yet, when confronting both intellectuals'/artists' views of America, we can also find analogous or even shared attitudes.

Holub – as an intellectual who was not favored by the Communist totalitarian regime, particularly after the suppression of the Prague Spring by the Soviets, when he was silenced – presented a surprisingly fresh and unbiased portrait of American society and culture. At that time, due to ideological reasons, Czech readers did not have many opportunities to read books on America, and the mere fact that Holub's book about the USA was allowed to be published testifies to the more liberal atmosphere in 1960s Czechoslovakia. Steinbeck published *America and Americans* at the end of his literary career, just two years before his death (1968). He is more synthetic and complex in his delineation of America than Holub. Holub's fragmentary presentation of American reality, resembling the form of the vignette, is justifiable considering his limited experience of life in America.

Forever Young: The American Cult of Youth

Bob Dylan's lyrics to the song "Forever Young" (also covered by Neil Young!) may be approached as mirroring a typical American glorification of childhood and youth (of course, it is not only an American trait, but in the USA it might be more apparent). Does this trait reflect the fact that the United States is still a young country with a short history? Or can it be dismissed just as some idiosyncratic obsession, or even the outcome of immaturity? Steinbeck and Holub address the cult of youth in their books and register similar symptoms in both a positive and negative sense.

In his essay "The Pursuit of Happiness", one of the chapters of his book *America and Americans*, Steinbeck asserts that "[i]n nothing are the Americans so strange and set apart from the rest of the world as in their attitudes toward the treatment of their children" (112). He focuses on the rather negative symptoms of the American obsession with childhood and youth. In the adoration and pampering of children he sees even pathological features, using such expressions as "disease" or "sickness". He traces the roots of this approach to children, dating them to the end of the 19th century, a time characterized by the mass influx of distressed immigrants to the United States. Since economic, religious and political reasons were the major driving force for their coming to the New World, they projected their dreams, desires, aspirations and also failed ambitions onto their children, whom they wanted to live a better life than they had. As Steinbeck puts it, "[n]o longer was it even acceptable that the child should be like his parents and live as they did; he must be better, live better, know more, dress more richly, and if possible change from his father's trade to a profession. This dream became touchingly national. Since it was demanded of the child that he or she be better than his parents, he must be gaited, guided, pushed, admired, disciplined, flattered, and forced" (113). In my view, the mere fact that child is put at the center of attention is not necessarily wrong; as a matter of fact, in pedagogy we know this approach to education as pedocentric, but Steinbeck points out the undesirable consequences of an over-liberal attitude to children – leading to their laziness, indiscipline, selfishness and, first and foremost, irresponsibility. It should be noted that Steinbeck wrote this essay before the criminality of children at American schools plumbed new depths.

Another aspect of “childcentrism” that disquiets Steinbeck is the commercialization of childhood and youth. These have become commodities, as children and adolescents are exploited as a market. This can result in what we can term a dictatorship of children, who instruct their parents which product to buy. In fact, as Steinbeck rightly notes, children and adolescents are a market in themselves, as they get allowances from their parents. Thus the market and mass media do their best to appeal to young people and design their advertising for this purpose, in order to ensure the “preservation of adolescence beyond its normal span” (117).

In Steinbeck’s opinion, due to the indulging of children, numerous Americans will never become adults. Their youth is being prolonged indefinitely, extended into the future, which affects the American personality. From this artificial maintenance of youth he infers that numerous Americans are immature. The immaturity of Americans is the subject of many studies, and though Steinbeck only touches briefly on this question, we can see it exemplified in various characters from American literature, ranging from Clyde Griffiths in Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* and Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, through Salinger’s Holden Caulfield and Kerouac’s bums, to Bret Easton Ellis’ yuppies.

Contrary to the cult of youth, Americans (but we can say not only Americans) have a fear of an old age. According to Steinbeck, one of the reasons for this fear consists in the retirement of older people still of productive age to make room for younger replacements – even though the retirees are still capable of working, not to mention possessing qualifications and a wealth of experience. Consequently many older people suffer feelings of uselessness and emptiness. Steinbeck concludes that “[t]he young dread to grow up, the grown dread growing old, and the old are in a panic about sickness and uselessness” (119). It only supports his conviction that many Americans, in their pursuit of happiness, are unhappy.

One of the features associated with youth (though not only with youth) is mobility. It is well known that Americans are a mobile nation, and thus it is not surprising that the car has become an inseparable part of American life and for a long time a mark of national identity. It often appears as an iconographic symbol of America and its changing reality in American art and culture. Although it is more a national than a generational symbol, its dynamism suggests particularly a link with youth. We can find numerous examples in literature, film and popular culture – ranging from the cult novel of the Beat Generation *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac to various road movies and musical genres (in song lyrics by performers such as Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Beach Boys, Janis Joplin, Bruce Springsteen, Tracy Chapman etc.).

As a poet, Holub mirrors the dynamism of America in the poetic title of his book. The second part of his *An Angel on Wheels* suggests motion or, more precisely, America in motion. He does not articulate the connection between mobility and youth explicitly, however as a devotee of the Beat Generation he probably borrowed the image of an angel in its symbolic function from Beat poetry. After all, he quotes or refers to Allen Ginsberg and other Beats several times in his book, and although they were already middle-aged in the 1960s, Holub refers to their works that were published a decade earlier and conveyed the spirit of the young generation of Americans. However, the poet sees a dense tangle of highways with signs and billboards and myriads of cars especially as a symptom of the advance of a civilization in which he feels alienation and loneliness. Highways lead him to an urban space of factories, warehouses, water tanks, cranes, aerials, and briefly

to an industrial landscape that he compares to the land of the Martians. He reinforces his feeling of estrangement through the recurrent image of a dying dog run over by a car, with drivers passing its bloodied body at high speed, indifferent to its death agony. As a matter of fact, Holub's description of an urban space with highways and cars is reminiscent of some lines from Ginsberg's *Howl*, in which the images of automobiles, trains and generally of industrial production express a lost past. Admittedly, there is no escape from this "new nature", as Holub calls the world of iron, steel and concrete; asphalt roads, herds of automobile, banks, hotels, restaurants and luxurious houses have already reached Robinson Jeffers's last frontier, Carmel, his stone Hawk Tower, Tor House and even the hills from which a loving shepherdess was descending and where Hungerfield fought with death. As Holub says, "Robinson Jeffers was dead for two months. Sometimes months mean decades" (21).¹

Holub, as an astute observer, sees America as a country where everything is subordinated to cars. He notices drive-in restaurants, cinemas, churches and even cemeteries. These places – hardly conceivable for Czechs – provoke his poetic fantasy, and thus personified cars are watching movies, talking or falling asleep, while less moral vehicles are kissing each other. In the cemetery near Jesup in Georgia, he sees bereaved cars whose windshield wipers squash tears. Looking at a boneyard with the several layers of car skeletons, he is overcome by loneliness (17). In his view America is adjusted to cars. Accordingly it "is not interwoven with roads..., America is strung out along highways" (12). Even in this impersonal organism of gas stations, motels, shops, hospitals, cinemas and churches whose location is determined by highways, Holub charts America's fascination with youth when he registers a billboard with "Pepsi-Cola, the drink of those who think young" (15).

Open Land in Nature and City

When Americans in the Early Republic attempted to define American identity, apart from such features as immigration and newness they also talked of an open land. Having compared America with the old continent, they were aware of the vastness of the uninhabited space. This awareness was still palpable in the 19th century, as we can see in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. And even in the 20th century, a long time after the disappearance of the Frontier, Joel Garreau named one region of America "The Empty Quarter", which is, in his words, "marked by enormous distances between everything" (Garreau, online). This thinly populated area stretches from Northern Canada to the deserts of the American Southwest. In this light we cannot be surprised that one of the eight sections of Holub's book is named "An Empty Space". Holub introduces it with a motto taken from Gertrude Stein's book *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (1936): "In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. This is what makes America what it is" (Stein 367, Holub 31). Traveling across the United States, he surely had plenty of opportunities to get to know the American landscape and natural world. He recorded his impressions of a desert in Arizona, Wisconsin covered with snow or a subtropical forest in Florida, and as a visitor coming from a small Central European country he must have undoubtedly been captivated by the grandeur of the American land. However, Holub does not hide the fact that he is of an urban disposition (it is worth noting that in 1969 he published another book inspired by America, *To Live in New York*, in Czech *Žít v New Yorku*).

¹ All translations from Holub's book into English are mine.

Surprisingly, Holub finds plenty of empty space in big cities – in endless rows of parked cars, on highways, in his hotel room tidied up by specters, even in a cinema. In his concept, empty space is a place where we experience loneliness, total alienation and the smallness of man. Thus he finds emptiness in a bus station, on streets full of people between skyscrapers or in the darkness round the corner of 42nd Street near Times Square. This space can be peopled like the Macy's department store on New York's 7th Avenue, where he perceives the same loneliness as the "childless, lonely old grubber" Walt Whitman did in Ginsberg's poem "A Supermarket in California" (136), to which Holub refers when describing the consumer frenzy of solitary people.

Steinbeck obviously admires the beauties of the American landscape. He confesses his enchantment by its variety, by "the fantastic accidents of nature, like the Grand Canyon and Yosemite and Yellowstone Park" (148). However, he knows that American nature is not boundless; its abundance can be endangered, and thus he calls for its protection. We should bear in mind that he did so at a time when ecological issues were not so strongly at the forefront of interest as they are today, and environmental debates were less common. He points out that the devastation of the American landscape is a long-term process that began when the American continent was first colonized. The first colonists treated the new continent as if it were an enemy. In fact, the Puritans' approach to the wilderness confirms Steinbeck's words. Wilderness was associated with evil, savagery, sin – as we know from various captivity narratives or from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Steinbeck gives the reader historical examples of the destructive behavior of man in nature, resulting in irrevocable damage to the ecosystem: "The destruction of the forests changed the rainfall, for the searching clouds could find no green and beckoning woods to draw them on and milk them. The merciless nineteenth century was like a hostile expedition for loot that seemed limitless. Uncountable buffalo were killed, stripped of their hides, and left to rot, a reservoir of permanent food supply eliminated" (146).

In Steinbeck's view, the cause of the destruction of the American landscape is man's irresponsibility and his greed for land. The construction of the railroad, which accelerated the "closing" of the frontier, made it easier to conquer the land. Steinbeck compares the influx of "land-crazy people" to locusts (146), and reminds us that in their effort to seize virgin soil, they were pillaging the country and its natural wonders as though they were limitless. Many places that Native Americans revered as holy sites have become irreversibly affected by civilization. Steinbeck mentions for example the redwood forests in California, which were mercilessly felled by loggers in their pursuit of building material. With the stream of immigrants moving westward, the need for the possession of land was dramatically increased and therefore the government decided to introduce laws to control the distribution of public lands. However, as Steinbeck shows, it was not difficult to evade laws and to outsmart the official authorities. He illustrates the tricky ways in which people acquired land using the example of his inventive grandfather.

Despite man's persistent irresponsibility, Steinbeck becomes conscious of a growth of ecological thinking among Americans. He welcomes the increasing attention that is paid to the protection of the environment and the conservation of wildlife. As he optimistically says, "We are no longer content to destroy our beloved country. We are slow to learn; but we learn" (149). Yet, in his emotional argumentation, he simultaneously holds back his optimism because "[i]t was full late when we began to realize that the continent did not stretch out to infinity; that there were limits to the indignities to which we could subject

it” (147). He appeals to the conscience of Americans who, in their striving to subdue nature, destroy its beauties by exploiting its natural resources for energy to make their lives more comfortable. As Dooley points out, Steinbeck was fully aware of what ails America – “destruction and waste in the name of growth and progress” (15). To make his appeal even more effective, he reminds them that it was Americans who first made and used the atom bomb. He characterizes Americans as “an exuberant people, careless and destructive as active children” (149). Reading Steinbeck’s essay after more than forty years, we realize that his words have a global meaning in spite of the fact that he addressed them to Americans.

Open Land of Culture

Comparing Steinbeck’s and Holub’s views of America, we can see that in some aspects they overlap, particularly in their vision of American culture as being less bound by past traditions and more open to novelty, to new experiments. It can be compared to an open land, as was discussed in the previous part of this article. Being writers, Holub and Steinbeck naturally concentrate on literature (though Holub also proves his interest in modern fine arts and as a scientist devotes much space of his book to the state of American science; moreover both authors pay attention to film and mass culture). The generational difference between them caused them to select different writers to discuss.

Steinbeck’s scope is determined by canonical American literature. Of course, he is aware of two lines in the development of his national literature, and when he says that “American literature... grew up twofold” (159), he essentially adopts Philip Rahv’s concept of American literature, distinguishing two types of authors, “palefaces” and “redskins” (in Cunliffe 20). He takes into consideration traditional writers who drew on European, particularly British traditions, mentioning Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and the intellectual Brahmins, but he is apparently drawn to those writers who were unburdened by the past, finding their inspiration in the rawness of the American continent. He finds Americanness in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and in the writings of such authors as Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, Artemus Ward, Jack London, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner and several others. He praises Twain because his “incredible ear and eye and sense of form ... were in communication not with classic Greeks but with Americans” (161), and appreciates Dreiser as he “wrote the sound and smell of his people” (ibid.), as well as Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, Eugene O’Neill, Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner since “their source was identical, they learned from our people and wrote like themselves, and they created a new thing and a grand thing in the world – an American literature about Americans” (162). It is important for him that “it has the sweet, strong smell of truth” (ibid.).

Also Holub’s book is full of literary references and allusions indicating that the Czech poet felt affinity with those American writers who stood outside the mainstream culture of the 1960s. He was attracted to non-conformist artists (and not only in literature) who formed a part of American counterculture. Unlike Steinbeck, he did not concern himself with canonical writers. His great fondness for the Beat Generation testifies to his opposition to official structures, and can be interpreted as an indirect form of protest against the Czech political system; the Beats were not favored by the Communist regime. As a matter of fact,

Allen Ginsberg was expelled from Prague in 1965, after having been elected the King of the Majales, the students' May festival that turned into a sort of political demonstration against the totalitarian regime (the outcome of this experience is Ginsberg's poem "Kral Majales"). It should be noted that in the course of time, despite censorship, the Beats achieved an immense popularity in Czechoslovakia, perhaps even greater than in the United States, as they epitomized a freedom that was denied to people in communist countries. They had a profound impact on some young Czech writers of the 1960s who were enchanted by their poetics and pursued a romantic rebellion against the establishment. Holub's writings carry traces of this influence.

An Angel on Wheels reveals Holub's kinship with those American writers who attacked conventions in their society and who considered its social order as hostile to their individuality. For them the loss of individuality led to spiritual death, the symptoms of which were mediocrity, comfortable thinking, civil obedience, conservatism, and adjustment to accepted rules. In their works, but also in their lifestyle, there was always something that was perceived as subversive to majority society. Holub does not conceal his admiration for them, and thus in his book he refers to or quotes the Beats and San Francisco Movement poets Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Michael McClure, their forerunner Kenneth Patchen, William Carlos Williams, and also Karl Shapiro, Henry Miller and the left-wing poets of the magazines *The Masses* and *Mainstream*. He depicts his encounter with Ferlinghetti in the City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, and expresses his affection for the individualistic Robinson Jeffers, whose poetry (thanks to translations) became very popular in Czechoslovakia. However, his scope also includes two great literary figures of the 19th century, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. This is no coincidence, because the non-conformists Thoreau and Whitman could easily be labeled as precursors of the countercultural movement; moreover we can see a strong connection between them, William Carlos Williams and the Beats.

What unites Holub with some representatives of American counterculture is his aversion to false materialistic values, uniformity and mass culture. Thus he politely rejects an invitation to a flamboyant show at the Radio City Music Hall, and though he appreciates the professional perfection of musicals in Broadway theaters, he makes it plain that he feels more at home in off-off Broadway theaters, visiting for example the avant-garde festival of absurd drama in the famous Cherry Lane theater in Greenwich Village, which stages plays by Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Richardson and Albee, or seeing Arthur Kopit's play *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad* at the Phoenix Theatre. The passages reflecting Holub's interest in abstract painting had special significance for the Czech reader as this art was considered decadent and subversive, and hence undesirable by the communist regime. Like his American counterparts, he is ironic when writing of the "square" or "plastic" society, with its prevailing middle-class values. In one of his sketches he depicts a typical boring afternoon spent with one family in a small Midwestern town where even "snow was ... yawning outside" (65) while people babbling about nothing inside seemed to be perfectly happy. Similar "happy" conformity is described in the sketch called "Annie Celebrates Her Birthday", in which Holub avowedly conveys his distance from what he experienced during a typical birthday party.

Although Steinbeck and Holub wrote about different artists (with some exceptions), both of them accentuated those representatives of American culture who fulfill Emerson's demand for originality released from the ties of the past. They also share a distaste for the

commercialism of mass culture which creates a biased, mediated picture of life, “a life that never existed, based perhaps on the dreams and the yearnings of the inexperienced and ill-informed” (Steinbeck 165). But, as Holub noticed, “civilization truly inclines to prefer mediated, depicted reality instead of reality itself” (89).

Conclusion

As already outlined above, Steinbeck and Holub were writers of different natures. Their books outlining their vision of 1960s America also differ. Steinbeck’s essayistic book, accompanied with eye-catching photographs by prominent American photographers like Ansel Adams, Alfred Eisenstaedt, Andreas Feininger, David Plowden and others, voices the author’s opinions on America. Steinbeck is deliberately subjective (he characterizes his opinions as “unashamed and individual”) (8) and hence at times controversial. He leaves it to the readers whether they agree or disagree with him. On the other hand, Steinbeck objectifies his essays by undertaking frequent excursions into American history and citing relevant facts from American life. In his effort to convince readers to share his opinions, he combines rational argumentation (based on facts, statistics, quotations, historical evidence, testimonies from authorities and personal experience) with passages written in highly emotional language. The range of the topics in Steinbeck’s book is much wider than this article can cover. His view of America embraces such important issues as the composition of the American population, the American system of government, racial problems, the stratification of American society, ways of spending leisure time, and even America’s future – the time which, from Steinbeck’s perspective, we are living in now. From the outset of each of his essays it is evident that he passionately loves America despite of his critique of American maladies “eroding the American spirit” (Dooley 17) and despite a certain skepticism, which only proves that he cannot be indifferent to his country. We can see it in his “Foreword”, when he characterizes America as “complicated, paradoxical, bullheaded, shy, cruel, boisterous, unspeakably dear, and very beautiful” (9).

In comparison with *America and Americans*, Holub’s book gives us a more mosaic-like, fragmentary picture of the United States. The author’s sketches or vignettes offer terse records of his experience of America. They are generally closer to reportages than to essays (the subtitle of this book is “Semi-Reportage from the USA”). In his vision of America, Holub effectively combines the language of poetry and science, showing his sense of detail and making humorous, sometimes ironic points. He often uses poetic descriptions: depicting San Francisco, he compares this city to a postcard album in which “the hills are so steep that walking on them strips man of all dignity” (73). His poetic vision enables him to observe “guests [sitting] at long tables like starlings before flying away” (57). In his interview with Wilde-Menozi, Holub says that he likes “to colonize poems with words from science” (527). We can add that in *An Angel on Wheels* he aptly colonizes America with words from poetry and science to achieve as exact a picture of this country as possible – though, like Steinbeck, he does not pretend to be objective. Wilde-Menozi claims that “Holub’s language, translated into English, remains disquieting, cool, and foreign” (521), but in Czech, Holub’s use of language is very natural. So natural that we read his account of American everyday life with real interest. Although Holub and Steinbeck emphasized different features of American life and culture, both authors present America as a land of contrasts and paradoxes; Holub perhaps in a more detached way – which is natural, considering that he was not an American.

More than four decades after publication of Holub's and Steinbeck's books, it seems that globalization has caused things which used to be perceived as very American to be applicable to many other countries, including the Czech Republic. "The ocean of cars" (Holub 61) with its tide can reach us almost anywhere, consumerism engulfs the rushing masses in supermarkets and shopping centers growing like mushrooms around us. However, both authors' view of America is surprisingly topical even now, confirming that America has undergone enormous changes since the 1960s, yet in many features has remained the same.

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Address:
University of Ostrava
Faculty of Arts
Dpt. of English and American Studies
Reální 5,
701 03 Ostrava
Czech Republic
stanislav.kolar@osu.cz